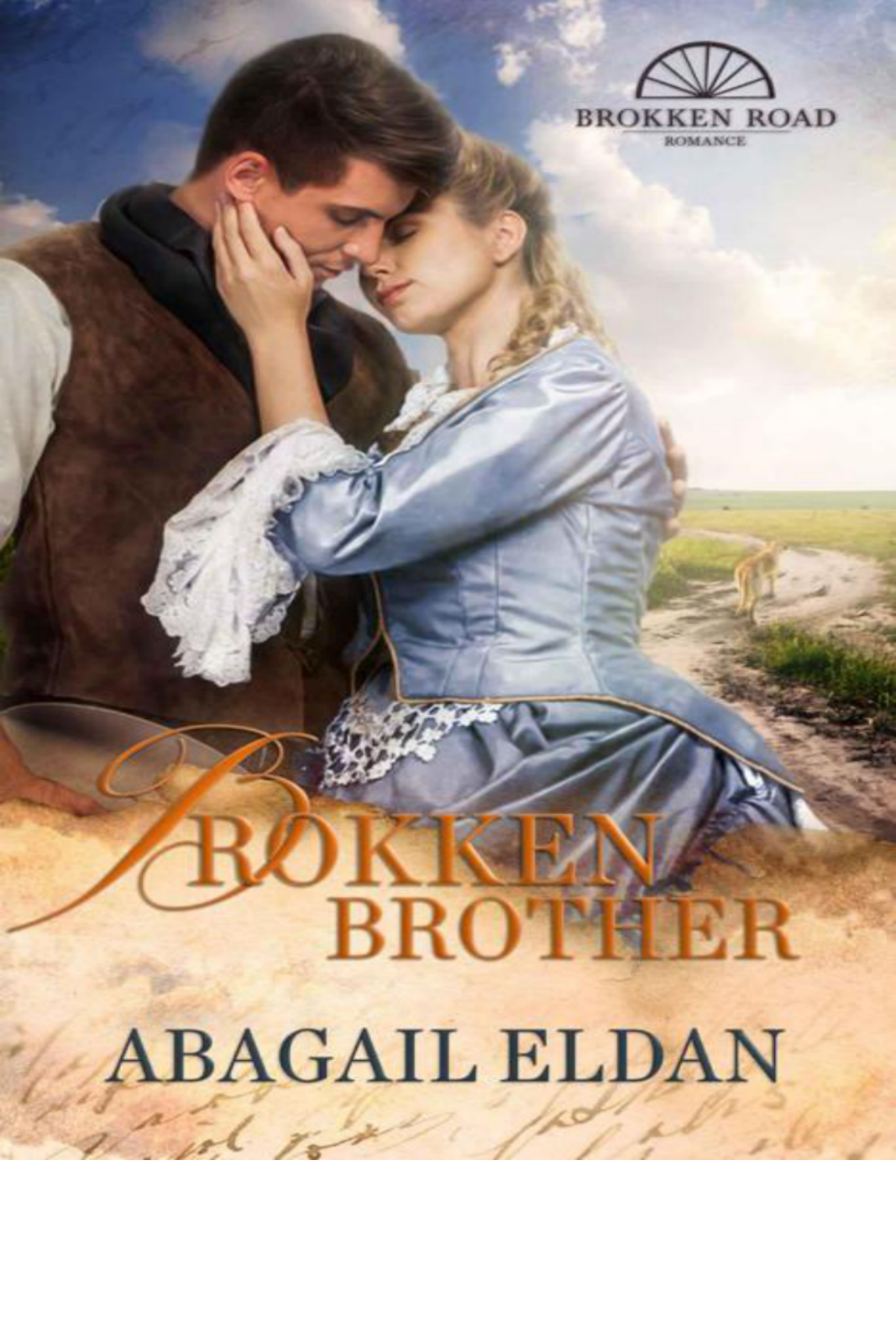




BROKEN ROAD
ROMANCE



BROKEN BROTHER

ABAGAIL ELDAN

Brokken Brother

A Novella

Brokken Road Romances

Book 5

Abigail Eldan

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Any discrepancies in the timeline between *Brokken Brother* and the other novels in *The Brokken Road* series are entirely my doing. Working with several other authors and attempting to keep an unbroken timeline for when characters arrived in our fictional little town in Texas proved to be a challenge. In a few places, that timeline needed to be twisted a bit.

There are also minor characters in this series who appear in several of the stories. As with the timeline, there may be discrepancies in how those minor characters are portrayed from book to book.

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to receive information
about new releases, contests and giveaways.

This is a stand-alone novella although it continues the story of *Brokken Arrow*. The story will finish in *Brokken Redeemed*, coming soon.

Dedication

Brokken Brother is dedicated to my husband who has always supported
my dreams.
Thank you, Carl!

Fritz Brokken turned his horse onto the Brokken Road and pulled up. He'd ridden long and hard, and both he and his horse were exhausted and dusty from the journey. He took a minute to pour water from his canteen onto his bandana and wiped away some of the dirt, even though the water was freezing cold. The temperature had plunged last night. With no coat, he shivered and rubbed the numbness from his arms.

Not two days ago, he'd been told Klint Caper was in Brokken. Fritz had no idea which house he lived in or else he would have arrived in the dead of night and been in and out quickly.

All he'd been told was that Klint worked at the Brokken Bank. Fritz chuckled at the irony before becoming serious again. As far as he could figure, his best plan of action was to ride boldly into town, right up to the very bank he'd stolen from—stolen the hard-earned money from the good folks of Brokken.

Fear pounded in his ears, although he'd grown used to that during the War. His hands would remain steady; it'd only been when he'd volunteered as a sharpshooter that his hands had shaken. Shooting unsuspecting men was not something he could stomach. He'd requested a transfer after his first foray and was granted it quickly. Being Franklin Brokken's son had its advantages then. Today, his father's name was but one more hindrance.

He shifted in the saddle, his teeth chattering, and heard the comforting creak. There was something solid about a saddle. It held you in place and kept you from sliding off the back of the horse. He patted the mare's neck and spoke a few soothing words.

They could do this, him and his horse. All he had to do was stay in the saddle. He steeled himself for the ride into town and urged his horse forward.

He was surprised at the number of horses and wagons in town. He came to a stop outside the bank and dismounted. When he tied his horse to the hitching post, he whispered he'd be back soon. He prayed his words were true as he stepped onto the boardwalk and opened the door to the bank.

Lydia Walsh counted out the money into the customer's hand and bid him good day. With the customer's departure, the lobby of the bank was left empty. He had not expected to see Lydia and observed her for a moment, his heartbeat quickening.

She smoothed down her dress and patted her golden curls before

turning to face him with a smile plastered to her face. The false smile that didn't reach her eyes faded away. Her lips parted, and her eyes widened when he strode toward her.

Before he could speak, Deborah and Klint Caper came out of the conference room, their heads bent together. Fritz stopped and pulled his gaze away from Lydia.

Deborah held a ledger. She blinked and thrust the ledger into Klint's hands and ran toward her brother.

"Fritz!" Tears streamed down her face.

Fritz caught his sister in his arms and swung her around. His gaze met Lydia's blue eyes, and his heart thundered in his chest.

How he wished things could have been different, that he could greet Lydia, but she would only interfere with his mission. He wrenched his gaze away and hardened his resolve. He had to stay focused.



WHEN FRITZ CAUGHT HIS sister in his arms and swung her around, Lydia remained frozen. Her still posture hid the emotions swirling inside—at least, she hoped it did. Fritz glanced at her over his sister's shoulder but did not speak and neither did Lydia.

Instead, with his arm still around his sister's waist, he moved toward Mr. Caper and grasped his hand, "Klint! Fancy meeting you here."

His grin wide, Mr. Caper clasped Fritz's shoulder. "Colonel Brokken, it's good to see you."

The door swung open again, and Lydia startled.

Sheriff Vic stepped over the threshold. "Fritz, you are under arrest."

She gasped although she should not have been surprised. Everyone knew the Brokken brothers had robbed the bank. What was surprising was how Fritz rode back into town, to risk his freedom, and for what? Lydia's heart constricted when the look of distress appeared in Deborah's eyes.

Deborah looked from her brother to the sheriff. "Wait, Vic. How did you even know he was here?"

The sheriff had one hand on the handle of her gun, still in its holster. "Lots of folks saw him riding boldly into town, like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Calvin happened to reach me first."

A flash of anger appeared in Deborah's narrowed eyes. She stepped between Fritz and the sheriff. Lydia longed to help her friend but had no idea how.

It wasn't that she wanted to help Fritz. He'd ridden away without a word to her. And not a telegraph, not a letter, during all of these

months. She scoffed. Why would she want a letter from a thief?

Deborah looked to Lydia, as if for support, and then back to the sheriff. "If he rode into town, don't you think that means something? Why would he do that? Don't arrest him until you find out. Please."

Fritz remained composed, standing next to Mr. Caper. The only tell that he was agitated was a crease between his brows.

Iron glinted in Sheriff Vic's eyes as she pulled out the cuffs. "We can question him over at the jail."

Deborah grabbed her arm. "Do you need to cuff him?"

The sheriff shook off her hand and moved toward Fritz who had remained silent until now.

He took a step back and raised a brow. "Do you mean to arrest me? For what?"

Sheriff Vic all but shook a finger in his face. "Don't play innocent with me, Fritz. You and your brothers robbed the bank."

His forehead furrowed. "Robbed the bank? Why would we do that?" He glanced to Deborah and back to the sheriff. Lydia could have sworn he was telling the truth, if she hadn't known better.

The sheriff grimaced and snorted. "You tell me, Fritz. Now hold out your arms."

Slowly, he did as he was told. "I assure you this is a mistake."

Sheriff Vic clicked on the cuffs, and Fritz lowered his linked arms in front of him. The cuffs emphasized the thinness of his arms. For the first time since he'd entered the bank, Lydia noticed he'd lost weight and wore no coat.

Lydia puzzled over his appearance. She longed to believe him, longed with every ounce of her being, but how could it be a mistake? He'd been gone nine months. As far as she knew, he'd never contacted Deborah, certainly never contacted her, or anyone else in the town.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Mr. Caper took her arm and pulled her to the wall at the back of the room. He probably felt as if they intruded on a family matter, as did she.

Fritz looked around, as if confused. "Where are Curt and Karl? Curt sent me to New York, to apprentice under a friend of his."

"Apprentice for what?" Lydia asked, without thinking. Heat rose to her cheeks when the sheriff sent her a sharp look. She shrank farther into the corner and linked her hands in front of her.

Fritz smiled vaguely in her direction before addressing the sheriff. "Curt wanted me to become a stockbroker. He hoped we could somehow infuse money into the town, help it to grow."

"And you stole the town's money to help the town?" The sheriff's eyes were incredulous.

Deborah stamped a foot. "If that's true, why didn't you tell me? I'm your sister!"

Lydia commiserated. Why hadn't he told her, if the feelings he professed for her were true? His words only served to break her heart—no, it'd already been broken, split asunder, and was incapable of breaking further. She refused to shed another tear over Fritz Brokken. If he'd run off to New York without a word to her, with no explanation, how could things ever be the same between them?

"I can explain..." Fritz said and shot her a sideways glance, as if reading her thoughts. His eyes clouded with pain.

Deborah's eyes glinted with anger, and lit anger in Lydia's chest. "And not one letter from you! Not one word. And where are Curt and Karl?"

Fritz looked abashed. "Curt and Karl were supposed to fill you in on the details." He gestured with his hands, and it almost appeared his brown eyes glistened with tears.

Lydia's anger dissolved, and her heart constricted. Tears pricked the back of her eyes.

The sheriff nudged him in the back. "You can tell the rest of your story in jail. Get going."

Fritz bit his bottom lip to stave off the tears. When was the last time he'd cried? The events of the last few months had taken a toll on him physically and emotionally. And seeing Lydia had made it more difficult to confront Deborah than he'd first imagined. The pain in the girls' eyes was evident, and to know he was the cause troubled him.

And then to walk down the boardwalk, with the cuffs drawing stares and town folks whispering, increased his agony. He did not recognize many of the people in the streets. He had expected the town to be sparsely populated, the way it had been when he'd left it.

Without a coat, he shivered in the cold, although he suspected his shivering stemmed from more than the cold. His shoulders straightened, as if of their own accord. He was here on a mission and had to focus. His brothers needed him, and he would not fail.

The sheriff walked behind him, her pistol holstered, although she occasionally pushed him along. Deborah and Klint followed until the sheriff pulled him to a stop. She inclined her head to his sister and Klint. "Go home, Deborah. Mr. Capen, you need to return to the bank."

Deborah was stricken. "Please. Let me go with you."

His sister's distress constricted his heart, and to distract himself, he looked around at the curious faces watching from a distance. He hadn't counted on this many men being in town. It'd be easy for the sheriff to get up a posse, if he even managed to escape.

Sheriff Vic still contemplated his sister, a thoughtful look upon her face, and then she gave a nod. "Chance might show up at home... You'd better go to Abby's."

Deborah had that look that Fritz knew only too well—fierce stubbornness, like when a snapping turtle got hold of you and wouldn't let go until it thundered. The sheriff must have recognized it, too, for she pulled Deborah aside to speak quietly to her.

Fritz took the opportunity to motion with his cuffed hands to Klint who moved closer. "Who is Chance?" he whispered.

Klint gave a short laugh. "You know him. Chance Hale."

Heat crept up his neck. He knew him all too well. His breathing deepened, and he frowned. "What is he doing in Brokken?"

Before Klint could answer, the sheriff turned back. "Get going. Fritz. Deborah's coming with us. Mr. Capen, please return to the bank."

"You sure you don't need help with this ruffian here?" His friend's eyes sparkled with amusement.

Deborah shot Klint a glare, and Klint winked. "Your brother and I go way back, Miss Brokken. He's a fine man I'd trust with my life."

The muscles in her shoulders relaxed visibly. "I know he is. This is a mistake, and we'll clear it up soon."

Her voice was loud enough to carry into the dusty street, and the chatter quieted. Klint's eyes glazed and then he blinked as if a memory had come and gone, as it had to Fritz. Klint removed his coat and draped it over Fritz's shoulders. The simple gesture produced a lump in Fritz's throat, and he swallowed.

Even the sheriff seemed affected, although she stepped closer to inspect the pockets without speaking.

Fritz gave Klint a nod. "I did trust you with mine. And thanks for the coat."

"Get going now," the sheriff said, giving a gentle touch on Fritz's shoulder. She glared at Klint.

But neither man moved for a moment. Klint's eyes became serious. "Anything you need, let me know."

Only then did Klint turn to obey the sheriff. She wasted no time but hustled Fritz along until they reached the jail. Once inside, she motioned him toward the back and uncuffed him before opening the cell door. Fritz hated the thought of being locked up again, but he stepped forward into the cell. The door closed behind him with a solid click. A narrow window, set high, let in a thin stream of light. He paced around the small cell and willed himself to release the tension in his muscles.

Deborah's hands gripped the bars. "Please, Fritz. Tell us what happened." Tears stood in her eyes.

Lying to the sheriff was one thing. Lying to his sister was another. He bit his lip, and the sheriff pulled up two stools and positioned them outside his cell. "Sit, Deborah. We'll both sit here and see if he can explain this situation to our satisfaction."

And Deborah took a seat and gave him an encouraging smile that did little to ease the queasiness he felt.



LYDIA PEEKED OUT THE window, wringing her hands. As soon as Mr. Capen returned to the bank, Lydia locked the door and pulled the shade down.

He raised a brow, his blue eyes sparkling, and moved toward her. "Does this mean what I think it does?"

She backed away and gave a sigh of exasperation. His flirtation was a burden she bore with good humor, most of the time. His blue eyes made it difficult to stay mad for long. Today was different. "I wanted to ask you about Fritz ... Mr. Brokken."

Mr. Caper raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

He didn't make it easier for her. Instead, he moved around the counter and opened the ledger without speaking.

Hating herself, she pushed the words out. "Did he ask about me?"

Mr. Caper's eyes widened, and he tilted his head toward her, frown lines appearing. "No, Miss Lydia. Should he have?"

Warmth crept into her cheeks. "Of course not. I thought he may have wondered what I was doing here at the bank."

Mr. Caper had not lived here when Fritz had been sweet on her. She'd forgotten for a moment.

He grinned teasingly, and his eyes twinkled, but his words were softer, as if he noted her distress. "I didn't get much of a chance to talk to him, not with the sheriff watching us like a hawk."

"Of course." Warmth crept up her neck. She'd made a fool of herself over Fritz Brokken. When would she learn?

She went to pull up the shade and unlock the door. She stamped down her embarrassment. "May I take my lunchbreak?"

Mr. Caper studied her, his gaze serious for a change. "Yes, you can. Bring me back something, but Lydia ..."

She'd snatched her coat from the wooden coat tree next to the front door and already had her hand on the brass door handle. She twisted her head to him. "Yes, sir?"

A sternness settled on his features, a look she'd never seen before. "No gossiping. Understand?"

She bristled, but something in his look warned her not to show her irritation. She simply nodded before she slipped out the door without taking time to fasten her coat.

She headed toward Molly's café and was stopped several times by curious friends and neighbors. She gave each one the same answer—a shrug. Mr. Caper had no need to tell her not to gossip—as if she'd gossip about Fritz, no matter how hurt and angry she'd been when he'd left without a word.

She didn't want to believe he'd stolen the town's money, but what other explanation was there? Cold air nipped at her nose, and she pulled her coat closer around her and buttoned it with numb fingers. She was glad to feel the warmth of the restaurant when she opened the door.

Molly met her with a smile. "You're late for lunch today."

No one else was in the restaurant. Lydia moved to the potbellied stove to warm her hands. "I'm sure you've heard Fritz has returned," she said quietly, her eyes downcast.

Molly came to stand beside her. "What of Curt and Karl?"

"It seems Fritz was under the impression his brothers were here in town." Lydia took a seat near the stove, and Molly sat down across

from her. Was that considered gossip? Fritz had spoken in front of several people, after all.

Molly's forehead creased, and she reached across the table to take Lydia's hand in hers. "Are you feeling all right, honey?"

Lydia blinked back tears and attempted a smile. "Of course. It's been a long time, and it was a shock to see him. That's all."

Molly patted her hand. "Thomas set back a couple of plates for you and Mr. Caper. Are you going to eat here?"

Lydia didn't have much of an appetite, but she nodded. "I will, but Mr. Caper won't be in today. He told me to bring a plate for him."

"I'll go get your food." She gave Lydia's hand another pat before she left her.

Lydia sat listless and waited for her food. Seeing Fritz brought back a flood of memories. And he'd barely given her a glance when he'd caught sight of her. Her heart still ached for him, but obviously, he'd never given her a second thought.

Lydia noticed she still wore her coat. She stood to remove it and then smoothed down a crease in her dress. Life was too short to spend pining over one man. She smiled when Molly returned with her plate. The food was delicious, and she determined she'd enjoy every bite.

Fritz threw his hat on the cot and put a hand on the solid wood wall. He needed a moment to compose himself and to remove the image of Lydia Walsh from his mind. She'd been even lovelier than he remembered.

Sheriff Vic gave a short cough. "Start talking, or I'll send for the circuit judge."

Fritz struggled to erase Lydia from his mind as he took a seat on the cot and rested his elbows on his knees. "As I've already said, Curt sent me to New York, to apprentice under a friend of his."

The sheriff gave a snort. "I suppose the people of New York welcomed a Confederate soldier?"

Fritz shook his head. "Of course not. That's why all the secrecy. I went incognito, tried my best to blend in with all those Yankees."

Deborah had remained quiet, although her gaze remained on him. She now spoke. "Why didn't you tell me good-bye?"

"I did bid you good-bye, that day at the bank. Curt did not want to disclose where I was going and was afraid your countenance would unveil our secret before we executed our plan. Our brother thought we needed to learn and invest first, to discover if we could in actuality profit from our investments before we explained to people what we were doing. We hoped others would join in the endeavor." He made an effort to smooth the planes of his face. Guilt burdened him every day he'd been gone, not only because he left his sister but for leaving Lydia also, for allowing her to think he no longer cared. He tightened the muscles of his jaw and looked away.

A stool scraped across the floor, drawing his attention. Deborah was at the bars again. "I don't understand why you took the town's money. It was foolish."

"More than foolish," Sheriff Vic said.

Fritz ran his fingers through his hair. "I will attempt to explain again. Curt talked to Karl and me. We decided something must be done, in order to return prosperity to the town founded by our father. He'd heard the Stock Market was doing well after the War and thought we should invest..."

"With the town's money." Sheriff Vic's voice cracked through the air like a whip.

"I know nothing of the town's money. We had a little saved up, not much, but he told me not to invest right away, not until I learned more. His friend I apprenticed under..."

“The friend’s name?” The sheriff narrowed her eyes and motioned Deborah back to her seat.

“Mr. Daniel Fitzgerald.” He had tilted his chin a notch higher and spoken firmly. The name was a fake one, but he would be on his way before she received information from New York. He flashed a smile at Deborah and tried to convey a message to her. “I’m certain you heard Curt speak of him?”

Deborah shook her head slowly, until she caught his eye. “Oh. Now that I think about it, I do remember the name, vaguely.”

Good girl. “I’ve been working with Mr. Fitzgerald for the past eight months or so. I returned home to consult with Curt and Karl, to discuss with them what they wished to do next. A very simple story, Sheriff. I am sure you understand we would never do anything to harm the town.”

The sheriff was eyeing him. “You look downright puny. They don’t have food in New York?”

Fritz laughed. “Yankee cooking will do this to you. I can’t wait to sit down to a good homecooked meal.”

The sheriff still frowned at him. “Why haven’t you written? No letters have been received.”

“Curt’s instructions. He feared those New Yorkers would find out who I really was. As you so wisely pointed out, the people at the New York Stock Market would not take kindly to the likes of me.” It was a flimsy lie but would have to do.

The sheriff fell silent for a moment. Fritz took the time to give Deborah a reassuring wink. She returned a weak smile before straightening her back. She searched his eyes again and gave a nod, as if arriving at a decision.

The sheriff stood. “And you say you had no idea Curt and Karl robbed the bank?”

Fritz stood also and moved closer to the bars and to the sheriff. “I know my brothers. I cannot believe they robbed the bank. There must be another explanation. Please release me, and I will discover the truth.”

The sheriff looked down and scuffed the toe of her boot on the rough cobbled floor. “I can think of no other explanation. And since you disappeared at the same time, I cannot rule you out as an accomplice. I will need to corroborate your story.”

Deborah rose and stood beside the sheriff, taking her arm. “It’s obvious Fritz does not know why Curt and Karl robbed the bank. Please let him go, Vic. At least let him stay with us.”

“With us? You and the sheriff?” Fritz asked, momentarily confused.

“I moved into the house in town, and the sheriff has moved in with me, to oversee my courting.” A blush rose to his sister’s cheeks. “I

have a fiancé.”

Fritz couldn't help but smile when Deborah cheeks turned redder. “And who is this young man?”

“You don't know him. His name is Chance Hale.”

He struggled to keep his features from revealing his feelings. He had to get out and get out now if Curt and Karl had a chance to survive. “I've heard of him,” he managed to say with a minimal gritting of his teeth.

With a look of defeat, the sheriff unlocked the cell door and swung it open. “Come on. I reckon Deb's right. I can watch you at the house.”

He snatched his hat from the cot and settled it on his head. He took Deborah by the elbow and walked her out ahead of the sheriff. While Sheriff Vic locked up, he whispered into his sister's ear. “Get Klint to come by the house as soon as possible.”

Deborah only had time for a short nod before the sheriff joined them on the sidewalk. “Let's get going.”

With a quick glance at Fritz, Deborah placed a hand on the sheriff's arm. “I must stop by the bank first.

“Don't tarry. I need your presence at home,” the sheriff said to her.

Deborah nodded and gave her brother a hug before she walked away with determination in her step.

“Don't make me regret this, Fritz,” the sheriff growled.

That was exactly what he was going to do.

Lydia gave a gasp when Deborah came in the bank. She'd not expected to see her again so soon. Lydia touched her hair, made sure it was in place, and ran a tongue over her dry lips. She anticipated the arrival of Fritz, but Deborah was alone. Of course. Sheriff Vic would not release him so quickly, not until she'd made inquiries.

Deborah smiled, but her glance went beyond Lydia. "Is Mr. Caper in?"

Lydia nodded. "He's in the back. Do you want me to tell him you're here?"

"No. I'll go back." Her eyes darted around the room before settling on Lydia again. "We are alone, are we not?"

Lydia frowned, worried. "Of course."

Deborah must have seen her apprehension. She gave a short laugh. "Seeing Fritz has me in a tizzy." She gave a soft smile. "Vic is letting him go home. I would extend an invitation ..."

Lydia could not bear to hear Fritz did not desire her presence. "I understand," she said, quickly.

Deborah gave her another smile, of pity, Lydia was sure, before going to the back room. Lydia knew she shouldn't do it but could not resist the urge. After Deborah shut the door, Lydia crept to it, held her breath, and pressed her ear against the wood panel.

"That's all he said." Deborah's voice was faint, but Lydia's hearing was excellent.

"Thank you, Miss Brokken. May I take the afternoon off?" As usual, Mr. Caper's voice held a touch of amusement.

"Fritz said as soon as possible. Please hurry." The doorknob was turning, and Lydia scurried to the front.

She made it behind the counter before Deborah fully emerged and spoke to her. "Mr. Caper has some business to attend to. I trust you can handle the customers this afternoon?"

"Certainly." Lydia kept her head bent over the ledger, as if balancing accounts. She didn't glance up until Deborah left.

Mr. Caper came out only moments later. For once, his gaze did not linger on her as if he had donned blinders.

"I'm not sure when I'll be returning, Miss Walsh. You will be able to close tonight if I am unable to return?"

Although Deborah had given her a set of keys two months ago, this was the first time she had been entrusted with closing the bank. "Yes, sir. I can take care of everything."

His eyes fully focused on her, his face serious. "I believe you can. Thank you for all you do. If I have failed to express my appreciation in the past, please forgive me."

Lydia was taken aback. It was as if he were telling her good-bye. As far as she could determine, Deborah had only asked Mr. Caper to come by her house to see Fritz. Inexplicably, a tear came to her eye, and when she smiled, her bottom lip quivered. Modestly, she said, "I simply try to do my best, Mr. Caper."

He inclined his head toward her. "And that's more than most."

He gave her a genuine smile that crinkled his eyes before he squared his shoulders and marched out.

She swallowed hard and blinked away the tears. She didn't have a clue what was happening, but she understood what her job entailed. She picked up the pen, her hand poised above the inkwell, said a quick prayer, and bent her head to her work.



FRITZ GLANCED AROUND the house he had once called home with his two brothers. The changes in only eight months amazed him. The house was cleaner than he'd ever seen it. When he'd lived there with his brothers, Mrs. Glinty had been hired to clean twice a week. Her arthritic limbs had kept her from keeping the house in pristine condition. Now, all the surfaces gleamed, and the house smelled faintly of pine.

He got a fire started in the fireplace while the sheriff put on a pot of coffee. When she emerged from the kitchen, she'd donned an apron, at odds with her outfit of men's britches, white blouse, and vest. The edge of the star peeked from the edge of the apron. She'd not removed her gun, and the outline of the holster was clearly visible.

"I hope you like your coffee strong," she said.

"The stronger, the better," he replied. Being in the house flooded him with memories. More than likely, he would never return, and he walked around the room to peer at the paintings of his family his father had commissioned.

He remembered the maypop wars, and the time the young brothers had taken turns riding the boar, until their father had admonished them. They'd chewed sour Indian cane and stripped honeysuckle flowers from the vine to catch drops of sweet nectar. Once, he and Karl had pulled down a young pine tree for Curt to climb on. When Fritz and Karl had let go, the pine tree flipped wildly before snapping in two, sending Curt flailing through the air. They'd been at the shooting house, by the lake, and luckily, Curt landed near the bank that had been muddied and softened from the hooves of the cattle. Once they'd been assured their brother survived, all three had fallen

in a heap, rolling in the mud, and topped it off with a swim in the lake.

He sighed heavily, turned away, and approached the fireplace.

The sheriff observed him, her eyes solemn. "I'll scrounge up some food. How would eggs and sausage suit you?"

"Fine." He took a seat next to the fireplace, leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, and linked his fingers.

The sheriff still studied him, as if he was an insect on the end of a pin. "I've got to tell you, Fritz, that you seem despondent, and that makes me nervous."

He searched for a reason to explain his melancholy. He cast her a sideways glance. "It was a shock to learn my brothers robbed the bank, although I do not believe for a moment they did so."

She nodded, her eyes thoughtful. "It seems more than that is bothering you."

"You have me under arrest. And if that's not enough reason for you, Deborah is engaged to Chance Hale." He couldn't help his lip curled when he said the name. He straightened in the chair and smoothed the planes of his face.

Sheriff Vic placed her hands on her hips, and her stance became rigid. "You know him?"

He shrugged. "Who doesn't know the name?"

"Let me tell you one thing," she pointed a finger and took a step toward him. "That War is over. We've worked hard the last few months to get this town united, to get people working together again. If you stay here, you'll forget what side you fought on during the War. Do you understand?" She inched so close that if she'd wagged her finger a bit more, she would have hit his chest.

"I understand," he lied. There was no need getting involved in an argument that might get in the way of his mission. And it was not simply the fact Mr. Hale fought in the Union army. He had been a Sharpshooter. Fritz had been a fair shot himself and volunteered as a sharpshooter for the Confederacy. Aiming at unsuspecting men filled him with revulsion. And yet, obviously, Chance Hale had not been bothered by it. Mr. Hale continued throughout the War, killing, perhaps, hundreds of men, with not a prick of his conscience. Good men. Men whom Fritz had called friends.

But there was more to his dislike of Chance than that, if he dared admit it to himself.

Chance had gone head-to-head with him, on Fritz's very first outing, outshooting him and scattering his men. Three good soldiers had died by Mr. Hale's hand that day, and four more wounded. Only one of Fritz's shots had found its target. No, it had not been Mr. Hale, but another of the Unionists who had derided Fritz's shooting, as if it

had been a competition instead of war.

Fritz had requested a transfer soon after that.

While Fritz's thoughts were wandering, the sheriff still talked. "Your sister loves that man, and Chance has shown only the highest respect to her, to me, to others in this town. If you have a problem with him, you have a problem with me."

He nodded and lifted his hands as if defeated. But he was not through with Chance Hale. When he had an opportunity, he would deal with him. For now, he could not spare the time.

Sheriff Vic seemed satisfied with his reaction and went into the kitchen. He stretched his legs out. For a moment, he imagined a few days of rest. No, he could not afford to tarry even a day. With time short, he got up and strode to his room, to wash and change. He didn't know when he'd have another opportunity.

After he washed up and packed a bag, he heard Deborah come in the backdoor and speak to the sheriff. He met her in the foyer where she hung up her bonnet and coat.

"Is Klint on his way?" he asked quietly.

She nodded. After a quick glance over her shoulder, toward the kitchen, she moved closer. "Tell me what's going on. Where have you really been?"

He shrugged. "You heard what I told the sheriff."

"I heard." That stubborn Brokken look came on her face, and her eyes locked with his.

"I can't tell you more—not now, not here." He pressed his lips together and shook his head.

A knock came at the front door, and Deborah, after casting him a look, went to answer it and returned with Klint, who looked his normal cheerful self.

"Who in blazes is that?" the sheriff yelled from the kitchen.

"It's Klint. He came to tell me about a problem at the bank," Deborah yelled back.

Fritz blinked at her, amazed how easily she lied to the sheriff. He didn't greet Klint but took his arm and pulled him to the hallway that led to the bedrooms.

Deborah followed, and Fritz pointed to the sitting room. "Wait in there and watch for the sheriff."

Deborah shook her head. "I want to know what's going on."

Fritz didn't have time to argue. Time was growing shorter. He motioned Klint farther down the hallway, toward the window at the end. Deborah stuck to them like a tick.

Turning his back on his sister, Fritz dropped his voice. "Klint, can you get ready tonight? I want to head out by sunrise. We'll leave from the livery."

Klint nodded and didn't ask any questions. The amusement had left his eyes, replaced with a steely determination.

"What?" Deborah hissed. "You're leaving? You just got here."

Fritz sighed heavily. For a moment, he gazed out the window, at the bare apple tree, before he faced his sister. "I'm going back for Curt and Karl."

She nodded, as if she'd known. "Where are they? And why do you need Klint?"

He ignored her first question. "He has special skills I can use."

When Fritz started back to the sitting room, Klint caught his arm. "Wait. I know someone with even better skills."

Fritz frowned at him. There weren't many sharpshooters better than Klint Caper. "Who?"

Klint stretched to his full height, and his shoulders became rigid, as if expecting an onslaught. His eyes met Fritz's. "Chance. Chance Hale."

Fritz spit one word out. "No."

Deborah did likewise at the exact same moment. Anger flashed in her eyes, aimed at Klint. He should have wilted under her glare.

Klint ignored her, and Fritz felt Klint's hand tighten on his arm. He lowered his voice. "You won't regret it if he rides with us."

Deborah clutched at Fritz's other arm. Fritz patted her hand and pulled away from Klint's grasp. "My no is final."

Deborah's eyes filled with relief, and she nodded her agreement. They headed back to the sitting room just as Sheriff Vic called out, "Supper's ready. Y'all wash up."



LYDIA KNEW CHANCE WOULD be visiting Deborah, as he did every night and planned to intercept him. To tell the truth, Mr. Caper's behavior had her worried. He had not returned, and her curiosity had gotten the best of her. After locking up the bank, she walked toward the Brokken Road. The air was cool, and she tightened her shawl around her shoulders. Darkness gathered when she finally spotted him.

A full moon illuminated his figure. He tipped his hat. "Good evening, Miss Lydia."

"Mr. Hale." She dipped her head in his direction and fell in step by him. "I suppose you're going to see Deborah?"

He nodded and kept walking. Her shoes pinched her feet as she struggled to keep pace with him.

"Did you hear one of Deborah's brothers has returned?" She kept her voice light as if she only exchanged a bit of gossip.

He came to a stop and turned to fully face her. "Yes, I've heard. Colonel Fritz Brokken, accused of robbing Brokken Bank rode into

town this morning. Little Calvin came to the ranch this morning to tell Mr. Isaac and me. Calvin's a regular Pony Express."

Lydia laughed. "Calvin seems to enjoy delivering news or spreading rumors. Take your pick."

Mr. Hale removed his hat, ran his fingers through his hair, and stared into the distance. "Have you heard anything further?"

"Fritz has been released from jail and is at the Brokken house. I thought you might want to know." She bit her lip and waited for his response.

He gave a short nod, and she reached out a hand to stop him when he started to move away. He paused and gave her a questioning look.

"Do you mind if I tag along?" She was glad the partial darkness hid her cheeks that she knew blazed red.

The quizzical expression remained, but he nodded. "I would be delighted with your company."

They were less than half a block from the Brokken house, and she grasped his arm, giddiness overcoming her. Her laughter bubbled forth, and they strolled to the house without speaking. Her heart beat wildly in her chest. She had to remind herself she only wanted to find out what was happening and had no interest in seeing Fritz. He was lost to her, no matter what happened.

Almost as soon as Chance knocked, Deborah opened the door. A smile spread across her face. "Chance, you must come in and meet my brother."

She pulled him through the doorway before her gaze landed on Lydia. Lydia stepped forward into the light spilling from the house.

"I happened to run into Mr. Hale, and he insisted I accompany him." She cast a sideways glance at Mr. Hale, and he nodded, as if Lydia's lie was true.

"Of course," Deborah cried. "Fritz will be happy you came by."

Mr. Hale stepped back to let Lydia pass. Deborah took Lydia's arm, and Chance followed. Deborah led her into the dark sitting room. "Fritz! We have company."

Fritz had been standing by the fireplace, his head down. He held the poker in his hand and thrust it at the logs. Oil lamps had been lit, and light skittered around the room.

Lydia could not help her heart leaped to her throat when he looked up and saw her. His face had been unmasked, and a smile lit his eyes, as if he was genuinely happy to see her. Almost as quickly as it appeared, it faded away, as if a shade lowered. His face regained impassivity, although the look had done its job. A warmth settled within her, and she forced herself to move out of his line of sight. Fritz's gaze traveled to Mr. Hale, but he did not speak or acknowledge him in any way.

Deborah's eyes were alight as she pulled her fiancé closer to her brother. "Fritz, this is Chance Hale."

Mr. Hale had removed his hat when he entered the house and still held it in his hand. He gave a wary nod to Fritz.

Lydia felt the chill between the two men as they sized each other up. Although Mr. Hale was slightly taller than Fritz's six-foot height, he had a slenderer build. Fritz's shoulders were broader, and his overall build more muscular.

Deborah took her brother's hand and gave a small laugh. "I told you I was engaged! You didn't believe me?"

After a long moment, Fritz moved the poker to his left hand and extended his right. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise," Mr. Hale said. The two men barely touched hands.

Deborah moved closer to Mr. Hale, took his arm, and tilted her chin. "I know he's a Yankee, but the War is over. We're one nation now."

Neither man spoke nor smiled. Fritz went back to jabbing at the logs. Sparks scattered, and a flame burst forth briefly. Fritz added another log and more kindling and ignored the pleading in his sister's voice.

Lydia took a step back, regretting her decision to trail along after Mr. Hale. The sadness mingled with anger on Fritz's face sent pains shooting through her heart. She was here now and would make the most of it.

The fire danced in the fireplace, although the place where Lydia stood remained in the shadows. The room was wide and long, wallpapered in a navy print that only served to darken the room. The vignette around the fireplace drew her closer, with its warmth of tans and reds.

Without a word, Fritz flopped down on a leather chair, surprising Lydia with his behavior. He'd normally ask his guests to sit before taking a seat. He leaned back in the chair, the wingbacks hiding his face, and stretched his legs out on the ottoman.

Deborah motioned to Lydia, and Lydia took a chair away from Fritz, although one where she could see his face if she leaned forward ever so slightly.

Fingers of light danced along the walls and emphasized the silence. Lydia studied Fritz, unobserved. His cheeks were sunken, and his skin weathered, as if he'd been a long time in a cold wind. On the rare occasions he raised his head, his eyes were glazed—sad if Lydia had to name their expression. She longed to comfort him in some way.

Mr. Hale had taken a seat next to Deborah on the settee, his hat still in his hand. He kept his eyes on his hat as he twirled it around and around.

Deborah chatted about the bank, about their supper, about how the town had changed. Nothing caught either man's attention.

Lydia felt horrible. She should be helping Deborah carry the conversation, not sitting there lost in her own thoughts. She cleared her throat. "Have you told Fritz about his surprise?"

Fritz raised his head slowly, his eyes still dull. "What surprise?"

Deborah shot Lydia a smile before turning back to her brother. "I haven't had a chance. Do you remember Windy's colt? Rebecca Walsh has been working with him."

"Yes?" He straightened in his seat and turned to fully face his sister.

Lydia spoke before Deborah could, hoping to garner his interest. "Lucky has come along fine." Her cheeks heated when she remembered how the horse had thrown her. It'd been her fault, of course, taking the horse out before he was fully trained.

"Lucky? I'd forgotten we'd named him that." Fritz gave Lydia a brief glance, but a sparkle of interest lingered.

"We'll go see him tomorrow—" Deborah broke off, and her gaze fell to her hands.

Fritz frowned at her and then visibly forced a smile. "Yes, we will. Tomorrow."

Silence fell. Deborah kept her face averted from Lydia, but she could have sworn she saw her wipe away a tear.

"Where's Sheriff Vic?" Lydia asked.

Deborah cleared her throat, but her voice was hoarse when she spoke. "She went down to the jail, to make sure it was securely locked."

Lydia stood, and the two men got slowly to their feet. "I must be on my way. The family will be worried about me."

Fritz moved restlessly. "And I'm sure Mr. Hale needs to get going, too."

"Fritz! Chance is my company." Deborah shot Fritz a look and then took Lydia's arm. "I'll walk you out."

"Goodnight, Miss Walsh," Fritz said, without looking in her direction.

"Goodnight." Her voice was barely a whisper, all she could manage. Anguish had closed her throat.

"Chance, keep my brother company. I'll be right back." Deborah took Lydia's arm, and they went into the hallway to retrieve her coat and bonnet.

Lydia leaned close to Deborah. "What's going on?"

Deborah looked startled. "What do you mean?"

Lydia motioned toward the sitting room. "All of that in there. They barely spoke to each other."

"Oh, you know men. They're still fighting the War."

Lydia laid the back of her hand on Deborah's cheek for a moment. "There's more. You're upset about something."

Deborah caught Lydia's hand and pulled it down. "Fritz was arrested today. That was humiliating."

"But he explained everything to the sheriff's satisfaction?" Lydia busied herself with donning her coat and gloves.

Deborah shrugged, her eyes darkening. "I don't know. Vic is going to do some investigating tomorrow."

The men's loud voices emerged from the sitting room, and Deborah hurried to the door. Lydia came to a stop behind her. Fritz and Chance were face to face. No, nose to nose.

"Stay away from my house," Fritz growled.

"Your house? Your sister lives here, and I abide by her wishes, not yours."

Fritz laid his flat palms against Mr. Hale's chest and pushed. "You'll do what I say."

Mr. Hale staggered back and moved forward almost in one movement. Deborah cried out, but it was too late. Chance landed a

solid blow on Fritz's jaw. Fritz stumbled and bent over although he recovered quickly. He lowered his right shoulder and plowed into Mr. Hale. They fell to the floor.

The backdoor opened although no one paid any heed. The men rolled back and forth, slamming each other with their fists. Deborah screamed for them to stop. Lydia was too stunned to do more than to ineffectively gesture at them.

Sheriff Vic came from the kitchen. "What in blazes is going on? Stop it now."

The men were beyond reason. The sheriff grabbed Mr. Hale's shirt and pulled him back. He swung wildly until Deborah stepped between him and her brother. Then his shoulders slumped forward, and he placed his hands on the floor, panting. Deborah knelt beside him.

Fritz tried to scramble to Mr. Hale. The sheriff grabbed his arm, twisted it around his back and sat down on him.

"I should've kept you in the cuffs," she said calmly.

Fritz struggled for a moment and then stilled. The sheriff nodded toward Mr. Hale. "You ladies go with Chance. He needs to get home before I let Fritz up."

"Why don't you arrest him?" Fritz grumbled. "He tried to kill me. In my own home."

Mr. Hale swiped the back of his arm across his mouth, trailing a streak of blood. He sent a look to Fritz that should have had Deborah's brother keeling over.

The sheriff motioned again with her head, and Deborah and Lydia, one on each side, led Chance down the hall, pausing only long enough for him to grab his coat, and then outside.

Once on the porch, Mr. Hale raked back his hair. "I left my hat."

"Promise me you'll stay here, and I'll go get it," Deborah said. "Keep him here, Lydia."

Lydia nodded. Chance rubbed his chin, and worked his jaw, groaning. Deborah ran in the house and returned almost immediately with the hat.

Deborah placed a hand on his arm and peered into his face. Anger danced in her eyes. "Are you all right?"

Mr. Hale pulled away. "Don't make a fuss," he muttered.

Deborah glanced from Chance to Lydia. "I'm sorry. Fritz is under a lot of stress."

Lydia wasn't sure to whom she apologized—to her or to Chance. She nodded. "I understand, Deborah. It must have been a shock to come back to find his brothers had robbed the bank."

Mr. Hale scoffed.

Lydia glanced at him and raised a brow. "What? You don't think he's upset over his brothers robbing the bank?"

“Not if he was in on it himself. And anyone can see he was.” Mr. Hale glanced at Deborah and ducked his head, as if he’d known he’d said too much.

Deborah took a step back and pointed a finger at him. “Don’t ever say that again. This does not concern you, Chance. You haven’t married into this family yet, so I suggest you do not get in the middle of it.”

He raised his head, and his lips twisted, eliciting another groan, and he touched his lip before he spoke. “Middle of what?”

Lydia agreed something was going on with Fritz. And if he’d been living in New York for months, why did he look so weather-beaten?

Deborah’s lips compressed in a straight line, and she raised her arms to shoo both away. “My meaning is clear. This is a family problem, and it is in your best interest to stay out of it. Now, please leave. It’s freezing out here.”

Mr. Hale settled his hat on his head. “I’ll see you tomorrow? Unless that’s getting in the middle of something?”

“Please go,” Deborah said. She turned on her heel and disappeared into the house without bidding either of them goodnight.

Lydia took Mr. Hale’s arm and pulled him forward, to get him going. He walked beside her without protest until they came to the end of the road. He came to a stop and held up a hand. She released him, and he leaned forward, with his hands on his knees, to spit.

When he did so, a dark shadow emerged from under a clump of trees, and Lydia stifled a cry. Her heart beat furiously in her chest until she recognized Mr. Caper.

The moon shone bright enough that she could see him clearly. He tipped his hat at her, but his eyes were on Mr. Hale. “What’s going on?”

Mr. Hale didn’t answer, still bent at his waist.

Lydia considered how much to reveal to Mr. Caper. “Fritz and Mr. Hale had a disagreement,” she mumbled.

Even in the dim light, the sparkle in his eyes was evident. He gave her a wink. “I suppose that is one way of expressing it.”

Mr. Hale straightened and wiped his mouth again, probably wiping away more blood. The moonlight was not bright enough for her to tell.

Mr. Caper studied him and then grinned at Chance. “I hope you did not damage Fritz more than the damage inflicted upon you.”

Even by the thin light of the moon, the anger flashing in Chance’s eyes was clearly seen.

“I must be getting home.” Lydia gave a wave and walked away. She did not want to find herself in the middle of another fight, even as a bystander.

Mr. Hale flicked a glance in her direction but didn't speak. When he turned to Mr. Caper instead, she made a quick decision. She ducked behind a nearby bush and peered through its branches. Her curiosity had gotten the best of her.

"What if I did?" Mr. Hale glared at Mr. Caper as if he planned to punch him as he had Fritz.

Lydia slipped farther into the shadows and hoped they'd continue talking. Her need to know what was going on with Fritz overcame the anxious beating of her heart. Maybe Mr. Caper knew something, and he would share that knowledge with Mr. Hale.

Mr. Caper rubbed his chin slowly and took his time answering. "Well, if Fritz is hurt badly, that would be a shame. It might interfere with our plans."

"What plans?" Mr. Hale frowned and touched his jaw, grimacing as he did so.

Mr. Caper glanced around. "Where has the lovely Miss Lydia disappeared to?"

Mr. Hale shrugged. "She left, said she had to get home."

Mr. Caper glancing around. Lydia stooped lower very quietly and held her breath. After a moment, Mr. Caper seemed satisfied.

He stepped closer to Mr. Hale. "I spoke to Fritz briefly. He needs our help."

"Our?"

"Yes, *our*. I'm not doing this without you."

"Doing what?" Mr. Hale placed his hands on his knees again and spit.

Lydia twisted her fingers. What if Fritz had badly hurt Chance? Relief flooded her when he straightened again and turned toward Mr. Caper.

Mr. Caper seemed unaware or uncaring of Mr. Hale's pain. He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not rightly sure what we will be doing, although it appears Deborah's other two brothers are in trouble."

Mr. Hale did not speak for a moment. When he did, his voice held weariness. "Where?"

"I don't know."

Mr. Hale straightened to his full height. "So, I'm supposed to go with you and Fritz"—he said the name as if he spit out poison—"without knowing where or why?" He shook his head and looked away.

"We're talking about Deborah's brothers. They need your help."

Mr. Hale worked his jaw and softly touched the left side of his face. He then jerked a thumb in the direction of the Brokken house. "Fritz didn't seem to want my help back there."

Mr. Caper sidled closer to Mr. Hale. "He doesn't know you like I

do. He needs your skill—”

Mr. Hale held up a hand. “I haven’t touched a rifle in two years, if that’s what you’re getting at. I ain’t planning on doing it now.”

“Not even to save Deborah’s brothers?”

“Save them for what purpose? If they return here, they’re going to trial for robbing the bank.” His face hardened. “With any luck, Fritz will join them when they are incarcerated.”

“Listen. I don’t know Fritz’s plan. Maybe after he rescues his brothers, they’ll keep riding, maybe out to California.”

“If they’re anything like Fritz, they are perfectly capable of taking care of themselves. Let Fritz go and join them. Good riddance if the other two share his disdain of me.”

“You’re upset. Think this over. What if Deborah finds out you didn’t lift a finger to help her brothers?”

“How will she know? We let Fritz ride out to save his brothers. If you want to go, you are free to join him. I stay put here, and she’ll never know.”

“She already knows. She was there when Fritz told me.”

Mr. Hale sighed heavily. “Listen, Klint. I had a little chat with Fritz tonight. As you can see, it did not proceed amiably. If you want to help him, help him. Leave me out of it.”

Mr. Caper clicked his tongue. “I had hopes we were friends. Would you send your friend to death and go on with your life here? Marry Miss Brokken and live happily ever after?”

Mr. Hale glared at him again and then sighed heavily. “I don’t want to stand here all night arguing with you.”

“Quit arguing and agree.” Mr. Caper slid another step closer to Mr. Hale and lowered his voice. “You know it’s the right thing to do.”

“No, I do not, although I suppose you’ll keep pestering me until I agree.”

“So, you agree?”

Mr. Hale held up a hand. “I agree to find out more. If it’s not to my liking, I will walk away. Understand?”

Mr. Caper nodded. “Yes. Fine. Whatever you want to do.”

“When do we leave?” An even greater weariness colored his words.

“Before sunrise.”

“Before sunrise? You mean in a few hours?” Mr. Hale shook his head vehemently. “No. Deborah was upset with me. I will not leave without speaking to her.”

Mr. Caper pointed down the street. “Go now. Just don’t speak of our plans.”

“You said she knew.”

“Yes, but the sheriff is in the house. She might overhear. Knock on the door, tell Deborah you’re sorry, and then you can ride out with us

with a clear conscience.”

Mr. Hale scuffed a toe of his boot. “I can’t. Sheriff Vic told me to go home. She’d probably arrest me if I go back.”

Lydia, her heart beating wildly, left her hiding place in the bushes. “Mr. Hale, there’s no need to worry. I’ll get Deborah in the morning. I’m certain she will want to tell you goodbye. To leave, without a word, is not right, no matter the reason.” *And was what Fritz had done, when he had gone away months ago, and what he planned to do again.* Her heart constricted with the knowledge of his indifference to her.

Mr. Caper took two strides, grabbed her arm, and gave a slight shake. “You little eavesdropper. I thought you went home.”

“I suggest y’all keep a closer eye out while you’re on your little adventure.” She pulled out of his grasp and held up a hand. “I’m not telling anyone about your conversation. I’m Deborah’s friend, and I would never do anything to hurt her.”

And that was true. But to be truthful, she hoped that she’d see Fritz one last time. Even if he did manage to return, he would be jailed, and nothing could prevent that.

Her lip quivered. At least she’d see Fritz before he disappeared from her life forever.

Lydia twisted her hands together to keep them from shaking.

Mr. Caper looked up at the stars and was silent for a moment before he shook his head. "You can't get Deborah involved in this, more than she already is. We cannot risk you two traipsing around when we leave and draw someone's attention."

Lydia shook her head stubbornly. "She must tell Mr. Hale goodbye."

Mr. Hale shot her a grateful look, and a tightness formed at the corners of his mouth. "I'm not leaving until I see her."

"The more people involved, the more likely we are to be discovered. Go home, Miss Walsh and forget all you've heard."

Tears stung her eyes. She'd never told anyone but her mother, had even erased it from her own mind, pushing it to the far recesses. Now, she fully brought the memory to the surface and replayed it. Fritz had once spoken to her of marriage, in a joking way, as something in the near future. When Lydia had asked her mother if he might be serious, she had replied that a man was always serious when he spoke of marriage.

If Fritz had not left, how different her life might now be. She would be Mrs. Brokken, and none of this would be happening. He would never have left with his brothers.

She took a deep breath and blew it out softly, bringing her emotions under control. "It does involve me—at least, it involves my family's business."

Mr. Caper frowned at her. "Exactly what do you mean?"

"Deborah left a horse in our care, to be trained. My sister and Jake have been working with him for several months now."

Mr. Hale nodded quickly. "Yes. We have to go by the livery to retrieve the horse."

Lydia's heart quickened at the thought her plan might succeed. "And I've seen the horses you two ride. We have a couple more that would suit your needs better."

Mr. Caper frowned at her. "Out of the question. We do not have the money to pay."

"Who asked you to pay? Consider them a gift." Lydia smiled, happy to contribute to Fritz, even in such a small way.

Mr. Caper removed his hat and beat it on his leg. "We'll get hung for horse thieving."

Mr. Hale held up a hand. "Hold on. She's right. We'll need better

mounts to keep up with Fritz. What if we trade our horses, and I'll give the Walsh's what little money I've managed to save?"

Mr. Caper sighed heavily. "Reckon that might work. And Deborah's paid me well at the bank. I'll contribute my share."

"It's settled then," Lydia said with satisfaction. "I'll get Deborah to meet us at the livery, before sunrise, and I'll have the three horses saddled and ready."

Mr. Caper gave a short nod. "Do you think you can handle the horses by yourself? We do not want your sister or your brother-in-law involved."

"Of course," Lydia lied. True, she'd been raised with horses, but she'd never taken an interest, especially when she was young, and her father and brother still lived and ran the livery. When they had not returned from the War, Rebecca had taken over, with a little help from their brother, Noah. He'd been sickly as a young boy and had never been a lot of help until Jake Wheeler arrived and treated him like a man instead of an invalid. And Lydia had never questioned the arrangements.

But if Noah could do it, she could too. She'd watched Jake teaching Noah, at first because she'd been attracted to Jake. As time passed, she realized her attraction to Jake was only to fill the gaping hole left when Fritz had ridden away without a word. Anyway, she'd learned a few things about horses. If Noah could turn into a good horseman, so could she.

Mr. Caper beat his hat against his leg again. "It's time to get going. We've been standing around half the night."

Lydia's heart beat wildly. She felt young and free, the world full of possibility—at least she had the possibility of seeing Fritz before he rode away. She reminded herself she was upset Fritz had hit Chance, but hadn't Chance landed the first blow? As much as she liked Mr. Hale, Fritz had her heart. "I'll see you gentlemen in a few hours. The horses will be ready."

They nodded and strode off together, their heads bent low. Instead of continuing home, she turned toward the Brokken house. She had no idea what time it was, but she'd see if Deborah was still awake.

A steadiness filled her limbs. She could do this, no matter who answered the door.



THE SHERIFF STERNLY told Fritz to go to his room and not show his face until the morrow, unless he wanted to be thrown into jail. His knuckles were raw, and he gingerly washed his hands and examined his face in the mirror. His lip was split, and his skin was yellowing beneath his left eye. He'd have a black eye by morning.

He needed sleep, but restlessness filled him. As soon as he heard Sheriff Vic retire to her room, he slipped from his.

In the sitting room, Deborah was on her feet, pacing. The moment he appeared in the doorway, she came toward him.

"Chance Hale is my fiancé. We will marry, and you will not stop us, no matter what shenanigans you pull," she said, her voice low and flat. The look on her face made him hesitate to enter the room.

She stepped aside. "We need to talk."

"Let it go, Deb." Fritz took a seat and leaned his aching head back on the chair. He could have been getting a few hours of sleep instead of arguing with his sister. It was true he shouldn't have hit that Yankee, not now when he needed time to rest, to plan, to prepare for what lay ahead. His fury had gotten the best of him. He flexed his arm and winced in pain.

"Promise me you will not interfere again." Her eyes flashed and narrowed.

"I don't want to argue," he whispered.

Deborah her eyes wet with tears, waved a hand. "Yes. I know you are leaving in a few hours, but you are coming back?"

He gave her a reassuring smile. "I promise I will be back, with Karl and Curt." It was an empty promise he knew, although perhaps it would comfort her.

A soft knock sounded at the front door, and Deborah glanced at the cuckoo clock on the wall. "My goodness! It's half past eleven. Who could that be at this hour?"

Fritz jumped to his feet. "It might be Klint. I'll get it."

But when he opened the door, it was Lydia, looking lovelier than ever, who stood on the porch. Without thinking, he stepped out and pulled the door shut behind him.

Lydia took a step back, into the shadows. He stepped with her and, when she failed to retreat, drew her closer. "I'm sorry." A faint scent of lavender, a scent he remembered from long ago, reached him.

He didn't know all he apologized for. Perhaps he apologized for fighting with Chance. Perhaps he apologized for leaving her for nine long months.

Looking at her now, how he'd gotten the strength to go was beyond his remembrance. He cursed himself, knowing he'd be leaving her again. He pulled her even closer and dipped his head to capture the feel of those soft lips. She flattened a palm on his chest, and her hand fluttered against him. Instead of dissuading him, it filled him with desire.

She turned her head and sidled away a half step. "Please, Fritz."

With an effort, he moved away and fought for control. The light spilled from the window, and he stopped there and waited for her to

speak.

She swallowed. "You should not have fought with Chance. We've been working hard to get our town to come together. Why undo all our good work? Chance loves Deborah and she loves him. Please, give them a chance."

His heart drummed in his chest, a mixture of desire and anger. More than likely, he'd never return. The thought of Chance marrying Deborah and living in his home had galled him into action, and he'd do it again, should the opportunity present itself. Chance Hale's unsuitability for his sister was evident, and he failed to understand how anyone could defend him. Obviously, the sheriff and Lydia did not know Mr. Hale's full background.

He shrugged. "Surely, Deb can find someone more fitting."

"Love is unexplainable. They love each other." Her eyes searched his.

Fritz scoffed. Someone like Chance loved no one, could love no one. Doing what he did during the War took a cold-heart. He would be the last man on earth he would want married to his sister.

Lydia came closer and smiled. "You'll get to know him better and find out he's a kind man. When you come back ..."

"I'm not going anywhere," he lied and frowned at her. Who had told her?

Pink infused her cheeks. "I heard Mr. Caper and Mr. Hale talking. I don't know your plans, although I do know you're leaving. I'll have horses ready at the livery," she said, as if reading his thoughts.

Fritz did not respond, not sure how much she had overheard. To remain silent was preferable to the danger his words might incur.

Tears hovered on her lashes. "Promise me you will be back."

Although he'd done so for his sister, he could not make such a promise to Lydia. With Deborah, it was different. His sister would have that Yankee, Chance Hale, to comfort her.

Lydia was young, and a pledge to return would give her false hope. If he was killed along with his brothers, no one would know of their demise. To fully face facts, what lay before him was a suicide mission. However, he could not, would not, leave his brothers to die, not without exhausting all within himself to render aid.

And to ask Lydia to wait for him was foolish.

He sighed heavily. "I cannot make a promise beyond my control to keep."

She was silent for a moment and then cleared her throat, still in the shadows. "I don't know what happened in the War, something to do with Mr. Hale—"

He snorted. No lady needed to know what had happened in the War—no one, man or woman, should have seen such atrocities. He

forced the images from his mind. "You don't need to know."

"The War is over, especially here in Brokken. We need healing, not division."

He crossed his arms. "That might be possible with others but not with Hale."

"You're being very hard."

"That's what War will do to you."

She sighed loudly. "I wanted to speak to Deb."

"Go on in. She's still up."

When she opened the door, and the light fell upon her, fully revealed her, his heart leaped to his throat. She glanced at him over her shoulder, her blue eyes pleading with him.

He was glad when she'd gone through and closed the door behind her, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

Lydia had not lingered long. Whatever she'd said to Deborah had paled his sister's cheeks, and Deb soon retired to her room.

Fritz debated whether he needed to lie down for a while, gather his strength, but too much energy surged through him. The road beckoned, and he was restless to be on his way. He went through the house quietly and gathered food and supplies.

At a quarter till six, he checked on Deborah and discovered her bed was empty. He puzzled for a few minutes and finally decided he couldn't chance looking for her, not with the sheriff in the house, who'd be up any minute.

He opened the backdoor wide enough to slip through and closed it softly. Klint waited for him at the end of the street, in the gray light before dawn. Neither man spoke.

Skins of silver rain, as fine as angel hair, misted around them. Fritz followed Klint to the livery, his hat pulled low against the damp cold.

Lydia came forward from the stable and held out a palm toward them. Fritz stopped and frowned.

It was a moment before his eyes became accustomed to the dark shadows cast around the stable. Two figures were entwined right in front of his eyes—his sister and that Yankee.

He gave a snort of anger and started toward them. Klint grabbed his arm. When Fritz attempted to break away, Klint tightened his hold.

He pulled Fritz back, none too gently. "Do not start fighting. Do you want to jeopardize your mission?"

Although Fritz knew he was right, white-hot anger surged through him. He gave a low growl and pushed Klint forward. "You go break it up, then, before I break Chance Hale's neck. What is he doing here anyway?"

Klint took a step, glanced back over his shoulder, and grinned. "I talked him into going with us."

Fritz gritted his teeth. "I told you no. Deborah told you no."

Klint turned and approached him. "All right. Would you rather he stayed here and wooed Deborah while we're gone?"

Klint had a point. A thought flitted across Fritz's mind of David sending Uriah to the front lines of battle. No, he'd never do that, but what if Chance went with them? That way, Fritz, at the least, could convince Mr. Hale to stay away from Deborah. And if one of them got

left behind, with any luck, it would be Chance Hale.

He gave Klint another push. "Get him off my sister and maybe he'll live long enough to go with us."

When Klint approached, Chance and Deborah parted, although his sister still held Chance's hand. Lydia proceeded into the stable, and Fritz gave Deborah a sharp look before he followed. Chance, Deborah, and Klint trailed after them.

Lydia lit a kerosene lamp and turned it on low. The horses were already saddled and ready. Klint and Lydia had done their job. The scabbards on each horse held a rifle, and the saddlebags bulged, so full the supplies Fritz had brought would not fit.

"Do you have a pack mule we can take?" Fritz asked Lydia.

Chance spoke. "We have enough provisions. A mule will slow us down."

Fritz ignored him. "Lydia?"

Lydia smoothed her dress, a fancy dress to wear out to a stable. She nodded. "Yes, but he's a little ornery."

Fritz's glance lingered on her for a moment before he forced it away. "Where's the mule?"

"In the back stall," she replied.

He made his way toward it. Lydia did not follow.

The bridle slipped over the mule's head easily, but when he pulled the mule forward, it balked. Impatiently, he jerked the reins, and the mule kicked out.

Klint looked over the boards of the stall at him. "You trying to wake everyone? We need to get going."

For some reason, his friend's words only made him angrier. He yanked the reins harder and the mule kicked again. Several of the horses whinnied, and the mule brayed.

Fritz ground his teeth, but he was not going to give in to a mule. He managed to get it into the yard, but not without further commotion.

Two figures emerged from the house and came toward them. The man, someone Fritz did not recognize, held a lantern in one hand and a rifle in the other. He raised the lantern higher as they drew near. Heat crept up Fritz's neck.

"Great," Klint whispered behind him. His friend held the reins of two of the horses. Chance, standing with Deborah, held the reins of another.

Fritz plastered on an impassive face and greeted the eldest Miss Walsh—no, she was Missus now, but her last name escaped him. "Miss Rebecca, it's good to see you."

She gave him a distracted greeting and looked beyond him. "Lydia, what's going on?"

Nothing need come from his ill humor. Lydia's sister would not try to stop them, Fritz was sure. He answered with a smile on his face. "We were going for a ride and came by for some horses."

"This early in the morning?" Instead of looking at them, Rebecca directed her question to the man standing next to her.

Fritz was keenly aware of the man's competence and the rifle he held loosely. Fritz scuffed the toe of his boot in the ground and considered his options. Making a run for it might get one of them hurt, but if they didn't, Sheriff Vic would be called to escort them to jail. This man would not be easily fooled.

Even as the thought formed, the man spoke. "Rebecca, tell Noah to fetch the sheriff. I heard her tell someone yesterday that Mr. Brokken was confined to his home until further notice. We'll see what she has to say about this."

Miss Rebecca took only a couple of steps. Noah must have been watching from the window for he emerged from the house and met his sister. She spoke a few words to him, and he sprinted away.



THE SKY WAS GROWING lighter, although the gray rain still fell. Lydia felt as gray as the dawn. She blamed herself for the fiasco. Maybe if she had not gone into the house before the men arrived, to change into a nice dress to impress Fritz, none of this would have happened. It had probably been her going in and out that had awoken her sister and her brother-in-law.

And if she'd stayed in the pants and shirt borrowed from her brother, she would have done a better job of bringing the mule out than Fritz had done. She'd seen the look on his face when he'd caught sight of Chance kissing his sister. As angry as he already was with Mr. Hale, that exhibition had made him act foolishly.

A chill ran over her. When Fritz found out that it was she who'd fetched Deborah, he was going to be furious with her. And his was not the only anger she had to face.

Rebecca rounded on her with narrowed eyes. "Were you helping them, Lydia?"

Lydia licked her lips and linked her hands. Thankfully, Jake saved her.

He touched her sister's arm and shook his head, taking the lead in an efficient manner. "We'll deal with that later. Rebecca, get the horses. Lydia, hold the lantern." Lydia and her sister hurried to obey, and then Jake cocked the gun.

Fritz held up a hand. "There's no need for that. Put the gun away."

Jake shook his head. "Not until the sheriff gets here. You three drop your gun belts and move over to that wall. Miss Brokken, please

join me over here.”

Deborah slowly released Chance’s hand before she obeyed Jake. The three men complied quickly, and then they waited in silence until Noah arrived back with the sheriff.

The sky was so low that one touch would have caused it to crumple and fall upon them, engulf them in its darkness.

For a moment, the sheriff glanced from one to another in the light of the lantern. The fury in her eyes landed on her lastly, scorching Lydia’s cheeks with fire.

The sheriff dealt with her and Deborah first. “Rebecca, take these girls inside. Please keep an eye on them—they are not to be trusted. Jake, I’d appreciate if you’d walk these three men to the jail. I’ll be right beside you. Too bad I only have one pair of handcuffs with me. Reckon you get the honor, Fritz.”

Lydia bit her lip, and her feet refused to move. Rebecca took her arm, dragging her along, and motioned for Deborah and Noah to follow. The ladies and Noah entered the house, and Lydia gave one last glance over her shoulder. The men had begun moving down the street. The sheriff and Jake walked behind. No one looked in her direction.

Rebecca pulled her into the house and firmly closed the door behind them.

Fritz leaned against the wall at the back of the cell, his arms crossed. “I told you not to bring Chance in on this.”

Klint, on a cot in the cell next to him, glanced at Chance on the other cot and then to Fritz. “What do you mean? It was your own fool self who wanted to take the mule.”

Yes, it was his own fool self, but if Chance had not spoken against it, he probably would have decided it was a foolish thing on his own.

The wall became a punching bag. Solid oak didn’t give and left his knuckles throbbing. He flopped on his cot and stared at the ceiling. They’d been so close to making a clean getaway—just hop in the saddle and go. His temper had again landed him back to square one. No, not square one. He’d been kicked completely off the board.

His brothers would be executed by the time he got out of this cell. Despair washed over him. There was no getting out, no reprieve for the anguish in his soul.

Sheriff Vic had left them to send a telegram to the circuit judge. Fritz tamped down the panic and considered his options.

The bank’s money was safely hidden. Perhaps if he told the judge that he’d return the money, he would go easy on him, give him a shorter prison sentence. He hated he’d brought Klint in this with him. The only bright spot was Chance would go to prison, too. With any luck, Deborah would be married by the time Chance got out.

Would his sister blame him for this mess? For the death of their brothers? Of course she would. It was but one more bit of guilt to drag along behind him.

His throat tightened, and he kept the tears at bay by getting up and punching the wall again and again, not stopping until his knuckles bled.

Klint chastised him, and finally his friend’s words penetrated, or maybe it was the pain, and he stopped. When he turned to face Klint, Chance had stood up, too, and surveyed him solemnly.

“What are you looking at?” Fritz snarled.

Chance tilted his head, and those disturbing eyes of his, as gray and dark as the cloudy sky outside, seemed to see right through him. “What’s going on with Deb’s brothers?”

Klint nodded his encouragement. “It won’t hurt to explain, now that our plans have been interrupted.”

Fritz considered their words and shrugged. “My brothers are currently incarcerated in a Mexican prison and face execution.”

“To save one’s brothers sounds a worthy endeavor.” Chance’s eyes bored into him. “But why are they incarcerated?”

“The why doesn’t matter. Nothing matters. We’re not going anywhere anytime soon.” Fritz flopped on his cot as Sheriff Vic returned.

She brought the stool with her, planting it right outside of Fritz’s cell. Without preamble, she spoke. “Start talking.”

Fritz’s lips twisted into a lopsided smile. “I have nothing to say, Sheriff, except that we were going for a morning ride.”

“You’re funny, Fritz Brokken.” She gained her feet and came closer to the cell, pointing a finger at him. “You find it funny you are breaking your sister’s heart? Find it funny you got these two men in trouble? Funny for doing God knows what? Your father would be ashamed.”

He tilted his head, laughed harshly, and then shrugged. “I don’t think so.”

The sheriff sighed heavily. “I’ve known you for a long time. I would never have expected this of you. Breaking your sister’s heart, not to mention Lydia’s, and acting like you don’t even care.”

He got to his feet, crossed his arms, and scuffed the toe of his boot against the rough floor. He pressed his lips together, the muscles in his jaw tightening.

“If you won’t talk, maybe I can get something out of these two yahoos.” She picked up the stool and placed it in front of the other cell. “Chance, let’s start with you. Deborah is crying her eyes out right now. Tell me why you were helping Fritz to escape.”

“Escape? I didn’t know he was under arrest. We were going for a ride, like he told you. Klint told us he’d spotted some quail down by the lake. Sounded like a mess of quail would be good for supper.” His eyes were round and innocent.

Fritz startled and stilled at the lie, not wanting to draw the sheriff’s attention.

She scoffed. “Is that right? In this rain? And you had three horses saddled and with enough provisions for two weeks? All to hunt quail?”

“Yes, ma’am. You can’t ever be overly prepared when you go hunting.” If Fritz didn’t know better, a hint of amusement tinged Chance’s words.

She tilted her head and frowned. “You do realize, since the Brokken brothers robbed the bank—oh...” She turned to fully face Fritz. “By the way, I just received a telegram from New York. It said no one fitting your description has been seen anywhere near the New York Stock Exchange, not during the last few months. And that name of the man you apprenticed with, Daniel Fitzgerald? He does not live

at the address you gave me. Heck, there's not even a house there."

Fritz shrugged "Perhaps I was mistaken."

The sheriff's attention returned to Chance. "Y'all do know I am trying to help you. Tell me the truth so I can do that. If you don't, Chance, there's a good possibility you'll be serving time. Fritz is going to be charged with bank robbery, since his story doesn't hold water. You and Klint, it could be argued, aided him in his attempted jail break."

Fritz snorted, drawing her attention. "I wasn't in jail."

The sheriff shot him a glare. "You were under house arrest. I should have chained you to your bed."

Fritz shrugged. The sheriff turned back to Chance, and her face softened, in a way it never had when she looked at Fritz.

She cleared her throat, and her voice was gentle. "Chance, the town of Brokken was a place for you to start over, to forget your past, and you found a woman who loves you. You're going to throw that away for the likes of that lying Brokken?" Her thumb motioned in his direction.

Fritz straightened. "Hey! There's no need to disparage my character."

She threw him a quick glance. "No, you do a good enough job of that yourself."

Klint laughed until the sheriff's glare got through to him. Fritz hid his own wry smile.

She returned to Chance again. "So, what's it going to be? Fritz is going to be found guilty of bank robbery, and you are going to be caught in the middle of it all. You will be charged as an accessory to a bank robbery, and you're going to do time for that. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am. You made it clear. Like I said, Klint wanted to go quail hunting..."

The sheriff let out a sound of disgust. "So be it. You're going to lose your freedom over this? I thought you had better sense, Chance Hale."

"I reckon not," he said softly.

She shook her head and turned to Klint. "Anything to add, Mr. Caper?"

"I only wish to corroborate the story Chance has told. Them damn quail. Wish I'd never seen them."

She got to her feet heavily, as if a load of bricks had been strapped to her back. "Times like this I wish I had the stomach for torturing. Give me a day or two, and I might develop a taste for it."

She left, not just the cell area, but they heard her stomping all the way onto the street.

When they heard the outer door click shut, they laughed until tears ran down their cheeks.



LYDIA'S SISTER POKED the wood in the firebox of the woodstove with a savage vengeance, and it responded with jumping flames. The chill in the kitchen dispersed.

Rebecca turned to them, the poker still in her hand, and gestured. "I wouldn't be surprised if Sheriff Vic threw you in jail. Is that what you want?"

Lydia, seated at the table, linked her fingers together in her lap, and shot a sideways glance to Deborah whose face remained composed. Rebecca had grilled them for what seemed like hours.

Lydia sighed softly. "You know we don't want to go to jail. I've told you, I think five times now, that Mr. Caper asked for three horses. I saddled them and met him this morning. Chance was with him, and then Fritz showed up a few minutes later. That's all I know."

Rebecca snorted. "Lydia Marion Walsh, you have never lifted a hand to help at the livery before. What gave you the fool notion to do so now?"

Lydia thinned her lips and spoke through gritted teeth. "You're going to wake mother if you don't calm down."

Rebecca replaced the poker in its place by the stove, took a seat across from Lydia, and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "We've known for months that the Brokken brothers robbed the bank, took the town's money, and hightailed it for who knows where."

Deborah raised her head but did not speak.

Pink appeared on Rebecca's cheeks. "Sorry, Deborah, but it's the unvarnished truth."

Deborah nodded. "I understand you're upset, Rebecca, and we are, too. Whatever Fritz was up to, he never confided in me."

Lydia knew there was no reason to tell Rebecca about Fritz's apprenticeship in New York. Gossip flew fast and furious in Brokken, Texas.

Rebecca traced a pattern on the table's oilcloth. "I like your brother, Deborah, always have. It's difficult to believe the rumors."

"What rumors?" Lydia asked, leaning forward.

Rebecca scoffed, and her eyes lost their focus for a moment before she blinked. "Some are outlandish. Some have a ring of truth. Some folks say Deborah's brothers traveled to Virginia, where her father had hidden a cache of weapons, in order to recover them, to prove that he had not stolen them as has been widely reported."

"That doesn't sound too outlandish," Lydia said.

Rebecca shrugged. Before she spoke again, her cheeks reddened.

“Others say they’d gone to California to use the town’s money to open a brothel.”

Lydia shook her head at that. “That’s not true. Have you seen Fritz? He’s lost weight, and, as Mother would say, looks peaked. I don’t think he was somewhere investing in a brothel.”

“My brothers would never do that,” Deborah added. For the first time, emotion infused her cheeks, anger or embarrassment, Lydia didn’t know.

Rebecca waved a hand. “I’m not here to impugn dishonor on the Brokken name.”

Lydia bit her bottom lip. “Too late for that.”

Rebecca got to her feet and opened the door to the firebox to add another piece of wood. She used the edge of her apron to shut the door. Instead of sitting back down, she paced the small kitchen. “The sheriff will be back sooner or later to talk to you. I want to hear the story one more time.”

The chair had become uncomfortable, and Lydia longed to pace the room as her sister was doing. “I visited Deborah, and with one thing and another, it was late when I left. Walking home, I met Mr. Capar. He asked me if I’d have three horses saddled early this morning, and I agreed.”

“And one of them you saddled was Lucky. You knew Deborah was giving that horse to Fritz. Why would you let Mr. Capar have him unless you knew Fritz would be there?”

That was the sticking point that Lydia did not have a ready answer for. She shrugged her shoulders. “One horse looks a lot like another in the early morning.”

“And you didn’t ask Mr. Capar why he needed three horses?”

“I assumed he had his reasons.”

“And why didn’t you tell me all this when you returned last night? You know Jake and I are in charge of the livery and would have taken care of it.”

“I didn’t want to wake you. I told you it was late when I arrived home.”

Rebecca turned to Deborah. “And here’s where you girls need to get your story straight. Deborah *happened* to be out for an early morning stroll. Heck, it wasn’t even daybreak. Plus, it had already begun to rain.”

Lydia caught Deborah’s eyes and held them for a second. Deborah broke away and glanced down. “Something woke me, and I couldn’t get back to sleep. I decided to get a head start on the day and got up and dressed. I then headed to the bank, to get to work.”

“And you saw your brother and stopped for a chat?”

Deborah raised her head. “Yes, Rebecca. Sheriff Vic told him not to

leave the house. I wondered what was going on.”

“And did he tell you?”

Deborah tilted her chin a notch. “You and Jake came out before he had a chance.”

Lydia glared at her sister. “We’ve had enough of this. Are you working for the sheriff or are you my sister?”

“I am your sister, but I’m trying to help you, to prepare you for the sheriff’s interrogation. Tell the truth. Don’t try to protect Fritz.” Her fist slammed to the table.

Deborah’s cheeks paled. Lydia’s heart felt pierced with a thousand lances. Neither could protect Fritz, as much as they wanted.

Rebecca’s glance traveled to Deborah. “I know he’s your brother, Deborah, but we must arrive at the truth, even if it hurts Fritz.”

Deborah remained silent, and Lydia’s heart went out to her.

Even if Lydia could not protect Fritz, neither would she betray him. Anger tinged her words to her sister. “I am not his judge, and neither are you, Rebecca. You’ve questioned us enough.”

Rebecca narrowed her eyes at her sister, as angry as Lydia had ever seen her. “I have one more thing, and you cannot explain this, try as you might. You changed out of your livery work clothes into a dress before Fritz arrived. You’re sweet on him and knew he was on his way. Don’t bother to deny it.”

Lydia didn’t. She blinked away tears and bowed her head to pray.

The sheriff arrived after lunch to fetch Lydia and Deborah. By then, Lydia's mother had prostrations, even after Lydia assured her she'd done nothing wrong. She explained, as much as she could, that the sheriff only wanted to question them. Rebecca stepped in to back her up, and, as angry as Lydia remained, she was grateful for her sister's help.

Even Sheriff Vic was gentle with her mother and assured her that Lydia was not in trouble even though that was not the whole truth.

It was a short walk to the jail, where Lydia assumed they were heading. Instead, Sheriff Vic led them to a buggy, the Brokken buggy. Isaac was on the seat and jumped down when they approached. Deborah ran to him, and he wrapped his arms around her. Tears came to Lydia's eyes, and she wished she had someone who would comfort her. Deborah cried on his shoulder for but a moment before the sheriff tore her away and motioned to the open door.

Instead of climbing in the buggy, Deborah moved to Lydia's side. The girls clasped hands.

The sheriff's stance was rigid, the muscles in her face taut. "Get inside, ladies. We're going for a ride."

This was not what Lydia had expected, and her mouth was suddenly dry. She exchanged a look with Deborah before they obeyed the sheriff. Lydia settled in beside Deborah and blinked away tears when Deborah grasped her hand again. Sheriff Vic sat across from them and studied each in turn.

They braced for the sheriff's questions. Deborah's nearness gave Lydia strength. If Deborah could do this, she could, too. Lydia might be losing Fritz, but Deborah was losing her brother and, perhaps, her fiancé. Lydia had to be strong for Deborah, and the thought made her tilt her chin to meet the sheriff's gaze steadily.

The sheriff leaned back, resting her head against the back of the buggy, although with the jolting, Lydia knew she could not be comfortable. Exhaustion on the sheriff's face was evident. Sheriff Vic passed a hand over her eyes, and they rode in silence for a few minutes.

The sheriff stirred, as if she'd dozed for a moment. "Let's get this clear, ladies. Are you going to tell the truth as to why those three men and you two were at the livery this morning?"

Lydia grasped Deborah's hand tighter before she answered. "Mr. Capar asked for three horses, and I got them for him."

The sheriff sighed heavily. "So, that means no. Anything to add, Deborah?"

"I was on my way to the bank and saw them at the livery. I stopped to speak."

Sheriff Vic leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees and looked to Deborah. "As I told your brother and Chance, I'm trying to help them. I need the truth to do that."

Deborah shrugged. "We don't know anything. Lydia and I have no idea where they were going or why."

The sheriff sighed deeply. "I've sent for the circuit judge. I got word this morning that your brother was never in New York, leastwise, not at the place he'd said he'd been."

A gasp escaped Lydia's lips although she'd been expecting this. Deborah leaned against her, as if all the strength had deserted her.

The sheriff's eyes were dull. "And you did not have any contact with Fritz, either of you, all this time he was gone?"

They both shook their heads.

Tears hovered on the sheriff's lashes. "I see no other outcome for this. Fritz Brokken will be found guilty of bank robbery, and Chance and Klint will be going down with him."

Deborah trembled beside her but did not cry. A sob tore itself from Lydia's throat, despite her effort to suppress it, leaving behind a rawness.

The sheriff straightened, and her spine became rigid. "Unless you ladies help me out?"

Lydia shook her head. Nothing they said would help the three men but would only hurt them. When she spoke, her voice was hoarse. "We don't know anything else. I'm sorry."

Misery engulfed Lydia, and she leaned her head against the window pane of the buggy but found no relief.

Deborah spoke softly. "Vic, will you take me by the jail and let me speak to my brother? Please."

"You think your brother will give you further information?" The weariness was evident in her voice and in the slump of her shoulders. The sheriff was far from heartless. A pang pierced Lydia's heart for thinking her so.

Deborah nodded her head. "I believe he will. I would like to speak to him alone, please."

Lydia cast her friend a look of surprise. "I'll go with you, Deb."

"Thank you for the offer, but I think he'd be more forthcoming if I spoke to him alone." Deborah did not glance at her but kept her eyes on the sheriff.

Sheriff Vic nodded at Deb. "I'm not letting him out of his cell. You'll have to speak to him in front of Klint and Chance."

Deborah nodded, and the sheriff tapped on the side of the buggy and called Isaac's name.

Lydia leaned closer to Deborah and whispered. "Are you sure you don't want me to go with you?"

Deborah straightened and shook her head. "This is something I must do alone." After another moment, she whispered in Lydia's ear. "Keep Vic occupied while I'm in there."

Lydia nodded. "I'll do my best."



FRITZ LAY ON THE COT with his hat over his eyes and must have dozed. The commotion outside his cell startled him. His feet hit the floor before he was fully awake.

The sheriff stood outside his cell with his sister and motioned Deborah forward. "She wants to talk to you."

The sheriff left. Deborah cast a look at Chance and shook her head when he started to speak. She put a finger to her lips until the sheriff's footsteps faded away.

Fritz picked up the cue from his sister and whispered. "What are you doing here, Deb?"

"I am going to break you out. Be ready." Her turquoise eyes flashed.

"How do you plan to do that?" Chance asked quietly.

Chance and Klint moved as close to them as the bars allowed. Deborah spared Chance a quick glance before turning back to Fritz.

A muscle twitched in her jaw. "Before I do, tell me what's going on."

Fritz debated on how much to tell his sister but decided she had a right to know. "Our father was responsible for a supply cache at the end of the War, and it disappeared. He was accused of selling it to the Union and hiding the gold for his own profit."

Deborah frowned at him, impatience in her eyes. "Yes, I know all of that."

Chance and Klint were listening. Fritz shrugged. It didn't matter. "It's partly true. Our father did sell it, but not to the Unionists and not for profit. Everyone knew the War was over. The men were tired of the deprivation, the senseless killing."

He couldn't help but shoot a glare in Chance's direction, although his anger toward the man had abated since he'd lied for him.

Deborah reached through the bars to poke Fritz's hand. "We don't have all day."

"Sorry," he mumbled. "He sold the guns and ammunition but not to the Unionists. He sold the guns to a representative of Maximilian. Curt, Karl, and I went into Mexico to purchase them back, to prove

our father had not betrayed the Confederacy.”

“Wasn’t that just as bad, to sell supplies to someone trying to establish a monarchy in Mexico?”

“No, because the War was over—it was only a matter of time. Many of the former Confederate soldiers had already joined with Maximilian and were fighting against Juárez’s soldiers. The part that matters is that our father did not side with the Unionists or have any dealings with them.” He forced himself not to glare at Chance again.

His sister’s eyes narrowed. “It shouldn’t matter one way or the other. It’s all in the past, and we must move on, whatever side we were on during the War. We must bring our country back together, not continue to bicker.”

“Regardless, it’s what we set out to do—to restore our family name. The truth is that grudges will be held for a very long time—atrocities from the War are not so easy to forget.”

Klint nodded. “It makes sense to me that Fritz wanted to clear your father’s name.”

Fritz shot him a grateful look. “To tell the whole truth, Father gave me the gold from the transaction. After the War, I gave the money to Curt who made some investments. At first, they didn’t do well, but now we’ve more than doubled our money.”

“I don’t understand. If you had money, why did you take the town’s money?” Her mouth set in a hard line.

“Simply as a precaution. We figured we’d meet up with Juárez’s men sooner or later and had no way of knowing how much gold we might need. We weren’t stupid enough to carry the money with us but hid it, not far from here. We carried enough to convince Juárez’s men we had more. Unfortunately, it didn’t work when we ran across his forces near Corpus Christi. We were captured, accused of being spies for Maximilian, and scheduled for execution.”

Deborah put a hand to her heart. “And how did you escape? And what of Curt and Karl?”

Fritz studied the floor. Some things did not bear repeating. He simplified it. “We overpowered the guards, stole some horses, and hightailed it out. Somehow, our brothers were recaptured. That was a week ago. If Klint, Chance, and I left now, it would still take a week to catch up with them. And that’s if Juárez’s men haven’t already executed Karl and Curt for trying to escape.”

“Why not tell the sheriff of this? Perhaps she could help, somehow.” Deborah’s eyes searched his.

He shook his head. “It still amounts to the same thing. We robbed the bank. And Sheriff Vic, no matter how much I admire her spunk, is no match for Juárez’s men. And the state of Texas is not going to get involved in struggle for power in Mexico. We’re on our own.”

“And you think you three have a chance to rescue Karl and Curt?” She didn’t look skeptical, only inquisitive. She looked down and whispered, “If they are still alive, that is.”

Fritz cast a look to Klint and Chance, and they gave a nod. He looked back to his sister. “I think so. At least, we have to try.”

Deborah raised her head and nodded. “In that case, we have no time to waste. Be ready.”

Fritz felt Chance observing him with those uncanny eyes. They were downright spooky. “What are you looking at?” Fritz snapped. He had to keep reminding himself Chance was on his side.

Chance appeared calm but reminded Fritz of a rattlesnake coiled and ready to strike. “I heard what was said, although my opinion was not asked.”

“Nor do I want it now.” Fritz felt like punching something again, although his knuckles still ached.

“Since I am a part of this ...”

Fritz waved a hand. “I didn’t want your help to begin with. Stay behind if you are having second thoughts.”

Klint moved to stand next to Chance. “Give him an opportunity to speak, Fritz. If all you say is true, we have our work cut out for us. It’s convinced me more than ever that we need Chance’s help.”

Fritz narrowed his eyes. “Are you wanting to pull out, too?”

“I didn’t say that. We need to have a plan in place and not jump in without knowing how deep the water is.”

Fritz sat down on the edge of his cot and rested his elbows on his knees. “Speak up. I’m listening.”

Chance spoke first. “I don’t like Deborah involved with this. If she’s caught, she’s going to prison with the rest of us.”

Klint nodded in agreement. “It’ll be bad enough for us.”

“Tell me what choice I have? Leave my brothers to their fate? Deborah doesn’t want that any more than I do.”

“Is she going to be riding with us?” Klint asked. “If so, she’s in danger of being captured by Juárez’s men, as you and your brothers were.”

“I guess we can figure it out later. It depends on how she plans to get us out of here.” Fritz linked his fingers together and grimaced with pain. He’d hit the wall one time too often.

A muscle in Chance’s jaw twitched, and his eyes narrowed. “Sheriff Vic will find out she helped, however she does it. We cannot leave her behind.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.” Fritz stood and walked to the outer wall. The window was set high and reinforced with bars with no way out. If he could figure a way out before Deborah could, it would be one less worry for him. He walked to the door of the cell and checked the lock. Even if he knew how to pick it, he had nothing to use.

He sat back down on his cot. There was nothing to do but wait.



LYDIA HAD DONE HER best to keep the sheriff occupied. She'd ask Sheriff Vic if Deborah's grandparents had been informed of the latest developments with Fritz. The sheriff agreed to take a quick trip to the Brokken Arrow Ranch, and she allowed Lydia to accompany her. They had not tarried. Deborah's grandparents had little interest in the fate of their step-grandson and asked no questions.

They'd returned just as Deborah descended the steps from the jail. When the sheriff asked her if Fritz had shared any new information, Deborah shook her head.

Sheriff Vic appeared unsure what to do next, and Deborah exchanged a glance with Lydia.

Finally, the sheriff glanced at Mr. Isaac. "I know you're busy at the ranch, with Chance in jail, but do you think you could watch these two for me?"

"I left the Jennings brothers in charge at the ranch, and they can handle things fine. I'm here for as long as you need me." He spoke to the sheriff, but his eyes were on Deborah.

"Good. Deb and Lydia, go with Isaac. I'll check on both of y'all later. Do not leave the house."

"Someone needs to check on the bank," Deborah said. "We cannot leave it closed for this long."

"It's little more than half a day," the sheriff said.

Lydia looked to the sun and noted from its position that it was getting close to supper. "We must check to see if there are any customers who have been waiting. It will only take a few minutes," she said to the sheriff.

"If Mr. Isaac is willing to supervise you, it's fine by me. I'm going to be at Abby's for a while, if you need me. But please plan not to." With that parting shot, she walked away.

Deborah and Lydia got into the buggy, but before they'd gone only a few feet, Deborah called Mr. Isaac. She jumped from the buggy before it'd come to a full stop. "Take Lydia to the bank. I'm staying here."

Mr. Isaac shook his head. "You know I can't do that, Miss Deborah."

"I'm not going anywhere until I get Fritz out of jail."

Lydia joined Deborah on the sidewalk. No one was nearby, and luckily, the rain had abated. After Mr. Isaac looked around, as if to be certain the sheriff had indeed left, he joined them.

Deborah pulled them into the alley between the funeral home and jail. "Karl and Curt are being held by Juárez's men near Corpus

Christi, if they haven't moved on. Fritz came to get Klint to help him. If my brothers are to be rescued, I've got to get Fritz out now."

"Why not tell the sheriff?" Lydia asked.

Mr. Isaac answered her. "No lawman is going to get involved in Mexico's political situation, not even the federal government. You have two men in Mexico vying for power. The United States will not be pulled into another war."

"But why ..." Lydia began.

Deborah held up a hand. "I don't have time to explain. I must get Fritz out now. You two do not want to be involved in this. Isaac, take Lydia to the bank. Please."

"Don't tell us what to do, Deborah Brokken." Lydia tilted her chin.

Mr. Isaac nodded. "Those boys have been like sons to me. I'll do what I can to help."

"What's your plan?" Lydia asked.

"I don't have one. I figured something would present itself."

Deborah looked sheepish.

Lydia took her hand. "I have an idea. I'll need the mule, and we'll need horses, for us and them." She indicated the jail with a tilt of her head.

"I think I can help, also," Isaac said. "I'll go by and see if I can get Jake and Rebecca out to the ranch with me. That way, it'll be clear for you to get the horses and mule. I'll tell them ... Well, I'll think of something."

"Go," Deborah said.

He didn't tarry but drove the buggy away. Lydia pulled Deborah around to the back of the jail. "See that window? One of us will climb up, tie a rope around the bars, and hope the mule can pull the whole wall down."

"I don't think it'll work." Deborah frowned at the wall.

"We won't know until we try. Let's find some rope. While we're finding that, it will give Isaac enough time to get Jake and Rebecca out to the ranch. And then we'll get the horses and mule."

"What if someone sees?"

Lydia shrugged. "It doesn't matter unless it's the sheriff. Just smile and say howdy."

Deborah grinned. "And let's change into pants. It'll make it much easier during our getaway."

The girls giggled for a moment and then set off to look for the rope.



DARKNESS WAS GATHERING when Fritz heard a sound outside, coming from the back. Lydia's face appeared at the window.

"I'm tying rope around the bars. We'll see if the mule can pull down this wall," she said and set to work to tie it.

Fritz had his doubts, but in only a few minutes, a gaping hole appeared where the window had once been, large enough for him to climb through. However, it did not extend into the other cell. He grabbed the rope and tied it around the bars that separated the two cells, and it soon crumpled enough for Klint and Chance to make their way through.

"I didn't think that would work," Fritz said to Deborah, once he'd climbed through.

"You should not have doubted. Remember our original name was Brecheisen, breaker of iron. Those bars didn't stand a chance."

They both chuckled until Lydia grabbed Fritz's arm. "The horses are in the alley. Let's go."

They were soon mounted and did not tarry but headed down West Street, across the bridge, before turning north.

Fritz knew no one was better at hiding a trail than Chance Hale and asked him to take the lead. They headed north for a reason although Fritz did not tell them until they'd followed Blueberry Creek upstream for ten miles or more. They kept close to the trees, growing along the creek's shore, close enough that the horses' left no print in the browned fallen leaves not yet blown away by the wind. Chance made sure they were not close to the mud that would have slowed their progress and betrayed their position.

Fritz found the spot they headed for easily and called for Chance to halt. He dismounted and let the reins fall to the ground. The flat rock looked just as he remembered it. Chance and Klint joined him but asked no questions.

He hardened the muscles in his jaw and motioned the girls over. "This is where we buried the town's gold. Help me with the rock." The rock was heavy, at least a hundred pounds, but the men were strong enough to lift it easily and set it down nearby.

The gold was not deeply buried, and Fritz used the pickaxe to quickly remove the top layer of dirt. Chance helped him lift the wooden box from the ground.

Fritz checked it quickly to be sure it had not been previously disturbed. All the money appeared untouched.

"The horses need water. We'll take them down to the creek," Klint said. He and Chance set off.

Deborah and Lydia huddled together a few yards away, speaking quietly. He walked over to him, brushing his hands against his pants.

"What are you two talking about?" he asked. Being freed from the jail and finally able to pursue his mission had him grinning despite the long, arduous journey that lay before them.

Lydia answered. "We're going back."

A muscle in his jaw began to twitch. "Are you crazy? You can't go back. Sheriff Vic will throw you in jail."

"What jail?" Deborah asked, her eyes twinkling.

They laughed, and Chance and Fritz came up from the creek.

"What's funny?" Klint asked.

Fritz pointed a thumb at Lydia and Deborah. "They want to go back to town."

"They'll be arrested," Chance said flatly. His eyes grew dark.

"Lydia and I were talking," Deborah said to Chance. "We decided if we went back now, intercepted the sheriff and her posse, we could give y'all more time to be on your way."

Pink tinged Lydia's cheeks. "Truth be told, I am not good at riding a horse. It's my own darn fault for not learning more. I'd slow y'all down, and if anything happened to any of you, I'd never forgive myself." Her words may have been for all of them, but her eyes remained on Fritz.

Deborah smiled. "Plus, we have another bargaining chip..."

"What?" Chance asked.

Lydia smiled. "The gold. I want you boys to put it back, just as it was. After we get back to town, we'll tell the sheriff that you told us where the gold was hidden. She'll think you're headed here and that will give you more time to get ahead of her."

"And then what?" Chance asked.

"I don't know," Deborah bit her lip. "Maybe we'll share the truth then. You should be well on your way. Maybe she'll understand."

"But if she doesn't, you and Lydia will be tried and convicted." Chance's breathing became ragged. Fritz almost felt sorry for him.

"I trust the sheriff," Fritz said.

Chance glared at him. "We can't count on it. They'll be sticking their necks out for us."

Klint punched Chance's arm. "It's their decision. But they need to decide quickly, whatever it is. We need to get going."

"He's right," Fritz said. "I'm not going to make this decision for Lydia or Deborah. They're intelligent enough to make it."

Deborah touched Chance's arm, and he turned his back on her and walked away, in the direction of a clump of trees. Deborah shot Fritz a harried look and then followed Chance, running a little to catch up.

"If we're about to leave, let's get the money reburied."

"Can you help, Lydia?" Fritz asked.

The three of them soon had the chest reburied, and the rock on top. Klint took a branch to smooth the dirt, attempting to make look as if it had been undisturbed.

As he worked, Fritz pulled Lydia aside. "Are you sure you do not

want to go with us? Chance does not want Deborah to go back.”

“I see that. If she wants to continue with you, I’ll go back by myself.”

Fritz nodded. Cold knots of fear formed in his stomach. “What if you are arrested?”

“Well, I can’t be thrown into jail, so it will have to be house arrest. It shouldn’t be too bad.” She smiled although her chin quivered.

He took her hand and held it against his cheek. “But if we don’t come back...”

Lydia smiled. “I have faith in you, Fritz Brokken. You will be back.”

His eyes met hers, and he could not look away. He leaned in, and his lips caressed hers for a moment before he pulled away. “I plan on returning, but plans can be derailed.”

“We both have trials to get through, but I’ll wait for you.” She laughed, the laugh that sent a shiver up his spine. “If I’m arrested, you can be sure I’ll wait.”

They both laughed.

She pulled her hand loose and raised her arms to wrap them around his neck. She cradled the back of his head, and he needed no more encouragement than that to pull her closer.

Her soft lips yielded to his, and he forgot all, at least for a fleeting moment, until his sister interrupted.

“What do you think you’re doing, Fritz?”

He pulled away enough to smile at his sister over Lydia’s shoulder. “And what have you decided?”

“I am going with you, unless you think I’ll slow you down?” She puckered her forehead.

Fritz laughed. “You’re a better horseman than me, er, horsewoman.”

“And don’t forget smart. Together, we can figure out a way to free Karl and Curt.”

“As smart as a whip,” Fritz agreed.

Chance and Klint joined them, and Fritz held Lydia’s hand. The clouds were breaking up, revealing the blue of the sky.

The way ahead was dark, foreboding, but the light lay beyond. Not just beyond but in each of his friends.

Most of all, in Lydia, whose blue eyes perfectly matched the brightening skies. And he did not care who watched. He gathered her in his arms to bid her a proper good-bye.



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